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ABSTRACT

This digest describes parent involvement in their children's education from the perspective of migrant parents and educators and offers strategies to enhance the experience of schooling for migrant students and their families. Teachers often perceive parent involvement as preparing children for school, attending school events, and fulfilling teacher requests. The life circumstances of migrant parents preclude such activities. In addition, teachers and parents may define education differently; teachers define education as academically oriented instruction, while migrant parents perceive education in terms of forming the child's character through appropriate child rearing practices. Despite barriers to migrant parent participation, most migrant parents want their children to succeed in school. Family intervention programs should recognize that parents may contribute to the education process through either environmental resources or emotional and motivational resources. While migrant parents often lack environmental resources (economic resources, education, familiarity with education systems), they can provide a wealth of emotional resources to their children. Mexican American parents with low education levels often use cultural narratives ("consejos") to motivate their children. Sixteen strategies to engage migrant families in the schooling experience are listed. (Contains 10 references.) (SV)

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Involving Migrant Families in Education

Yolanda G. Martínez, Ph.D. & José A. Velázquez, M.Ed.

Children of migrant farmworkers, more than other children, confront a number of risk factors for school failure (Menchaca & Ruiz-Escalante, 1995). Some of these factors—including mobility, poverty, and lack of access to schooling—were recognized and described as early as the 1940s. School-level data, however, indicate that educators frequently attribute school failure to a lack of parent involvement ("parents just don't care"). This digest describes parent involvement in the education process from the perspective of parents and educators and offers strategies to enhance the experience of schooling for migrant students and their families.

Parent Involvement in Education

In the move toward a more inclusive education system, parents are encouraged, and often expected, to visit their children's school regularly. These expectations are guided by a set of assumptions, held mostly by teachers, regarding the role parents should play in their children's education. According to Lareau (1989, p.2-3), parent involvement as perceived by teachers involves

> Preparing children for school (i.e., teaching children the alphabet, talking and reading to children to promote language development), attending school events (i.e., parent-teacher conferences) and fulfilling any requests teachers make of parents (i.e., to play word games with their children at home).

It is no wonder that migrant parents are so often perceived as uninvolved: Their life circumstances preclude fulfillment of the expected role.

Definitions of education. Although most migrant parents are financially unable to buy their children expensive educational toys, and lack the time or educational background to participate in their children's education as schools expect, they do make a significant contribution to their children's education. To understand migrant parent involvement, educators must understand how migrant parents define education and the role they play in the process of education thus defined.

A study of the similarities and differences in the way school teachers and migrant parents perceive education revealed a basic difference between "education" and "instruction" (Martínez, 1997). Mothers defined education in terms of forming the child's character—focusing on such issues as development of morals, values, respect for self and others, good manners, responsibility towards self and the community, and so forth. Teachers, on the other hand, defined education in terms of academically oriented instruction—learning to read, developing writing skills, and mathematical problem-solving.

Willingness vs. capability. Some migrant parents are nonetheless aware of schools' expectations for them. These parents cite barriers that impede participation in their children's educational activities. Lack of English proficiency limits the extent to which migrant parents can help their children with homework and can also limit parents' ability to communicate with teachers. Lack of educational skills becomes an even greater factor when helping their older children, as described by one migrant mother (Martínez, 1997, pp. 71-72):

> With two of my children, I do very little because they go to higher grades . . . I can't participate with them because I don't have the education. What I do is . . . take them to the library so they can find information in books . . . the one I do a little more with is the youngest, she is in fifth grade, so I sit with her and help her and I go over her homework.

Lack of time, frequently cited as a barrier to parent involvement, presents particular hardships to migrant farmworkers who enter the fields before dawn and return home late in the evening. One migrant worker put it this way:

> There are times when you get up so early in the morning that you only have time to get your children dressed and take them to someone to take care of them. In the evenings, sometimes you pick them up and they are already asleep . . . sometimes you can pick them up earlier . . . but then you have to go home and clean, wash clothes, cook . . . Sometimes you are so tired that you get home in a bad mood and maybe you take it out on your children . . . I think that a person who works in the fields is affected by having to invest so much time in that work . . . (Martínez, 1997, p. 75)

Overview of the Literature on Parent Involvement in Education

While most migrant parents want their children to succeed in school (Lareau, 1989; Martínez, 1991), not all parents construct the path to success in the same way. Valdés (1996) suggests that efforts to involve migrant parents must take into account social inequalities, educational ideologies, educational structures, and interpersonal interactions, as well as the interplay of these factors. Such diverse influences inevitably shape educational outcomes for migrant children.

According to Valdés (1996), family intervention programs have been *prescriptive* for the most part—parents are rarely engaged or invited to participate in describing or diagnosing a dilemma. She argues that families themselves should play an integral role in this effort by using their resources, networks, and traditions.

Family intervention programs based on an understanding, appreciation, and respect for the internal dynamics of these families, as well as for their values and beliefs, are essential to improving the involvement of migrant parents in education. Practitioners involved in such programs will not only help to maintain the integrity of migrant families, they will themselves begin to recognize that new immigrants bring with them successful lifeways that enrich our society as a whole.

Following Delgado-Gaitán's (1990, 1993) argument, parents' contributions to the education process can be accessed through *environmental resources* or *emotional and motivational resources*. *Environmental resources* refer to parents' economic resources, education level, familiarity with education systems, participation in social networks outside the home, and so forth. Thus, *environmental resources* are the cumulative result of parents' economic and education backgrounds and their participation in and familiarity with the system (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990).

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Emotional and motivational resources refer to parents' perceptions of education as important for socioeconomic success. Emotional support, thus, is provided through stories of how difficult life was for them without an education. The idea of cultural narratives as a powerful educational tool among Mexican American families was explored by Delgado-Gaitan (1993) through her seven-year work with a Mexican family. Cultural narratives in the form of *consejos* were used by parents with low education levels to encourage their children to do well in school and to listen to their teachers.

Although migrant parents may lack access to some elements of environmental resources, they nonetheless provide a wealth of emotional resources to their children. Often, this grounding rests on a very strong work ethic that transfers to other realms of life. Parents often mention the desire for their children to have an education, something they wish they had attained themselves (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990; Valdés, 1996; Martinez, 1997). Parent contributions are also significant in areas that teachers might not readily recognize—for instance, encouraging their children to be responsible citizens who not only earn self-respect but who are ready to grant respect to others.

Migrant Family Involvement Strategies

Opportunities for migrant student success can be nurtured through family involvement activities that are sensitive to their mobile way of life and culture. The following strategies can enhance the schooling experience for migrant students and their families (for details see Menchaca & Ruiz-Escalante, 1995; Whitaker, Salend, & Gutiérrez, 1997; Romo, 1999; Murray & Velázquez, 2000):

- Bilingual community liaisons can help bridge language and cultural differences between home and school (i.e., they can train parents to reinforce education concepts in the native language and/or English).
- Child care, transportation, evening and weekend activities, and refreshments can increase the likelihood of migrant parent participation.
- Curriculum that reflects the culture, values, interests, experiences, and concerns of the migrant family can enhance learning—parents can more easily relate to such "homework" and will be more inclined to help their child with subjects that affirm their experiences (also increasing their confidence and self-esteem).
- Flexible instructional programming that allows students to drop out of school to work or take care of family responsibilities and that allows them to return and pick up their academic work without penalties can increase migrant student success.
- Multiple, coordinated "second-chance" opportunities for education and training—at worksites, community centers, churches, and school sites—can be made available for both students and families.
- Distance learning efforts in public computer centers can provide migrant students and their families with continuous access to on-line links to college and ESL courses (e.g., Kentucky Migrant Technology Project: http://www.migrant.org).
- Partnerships with the agriculture industry can help cultivate potential collaborative activities that allow schools to tap into parents' knowledge, skills, and talents through "flex time," (i.e., allowing parents to attend school activities during work hours).
- Parent-teacher conferences can give migrant parents an opportunity to express ways they believe they can contribute to their children's education.
- Social and health outreach efforts can be coordinated with local school community involvement activities, making them less threatening to migrant parents who are hard to reach.
- Bilingual and Spanish language books in schools and public libraries can help promote family reading at home.
- Transcribed library collections of oral family histories or experiences provide parents, grandparents, and other family members with links to school and community.
- Bilingual community liaisons and others—secondary school advisors, advocates, and peer and cross-age tutors or mentors—can effectively reach out to parents and secondary school students.
- Parent programs can include workshops or retreats at colleges and universities, which would also provide an early orientation to the postsecondary education process.
- Parent workshops that include such activities as "sharing secret talents" help to expose untapped parent skills (e.g., singing, craftsmanship, crocheting, etc.) that can be tapped to benefit students and schools.
- Career education (in the community) and work-study positions (with parent inclusions) promote higher aspirations among students and families.
- Thinking "family" rather than just "parent" when planning involvement activities will help ensure program effectiveness.

Involving migrant parents in their children's education is an essential component in the educational success of migrant children. This Digest highlights the importance of understanding migrant families' strengths, the challenges their mobile lifestyle creates, as well as the positive contributions migrant parents *already* make to their children's education.

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